

Mexico fights to save species ensnared in China black market

May 5 2016, by Laurent Thomet, With Dennis Chong In Hong Kong



Fish maw drying outside a dried goods store in Hong Kong

The high-speed navy boat stopped on the moonlit waters of Mexico's Gulf of California as sailors looked through binoculars for small vessels conducting illegal activities under the cover of darkness.

While naval forces patrol the seas to thwart drug trafficking, the sailors were not searching for cocaine ships that night off the coast of San

Felipe, a fishing town.

They were hunting for poachers using banned gillnets to catch totoaba, a critically endangered fish whose swim bladders are dried and sold for tens of thousands of dollars on the black market in China despite an international prohibition.

The government beefed up patrols on the upper Gulf of California a year ago because the vast nets have also led to the near extinction of the world's smallest porpoise, the vaquita marina ("little cow").

The alarm was raised after a 2014 study found fewer than 100 vaquitas, down from 200 in 2012, warning the species could vanish by 2018. Scientists spotted up to 25 in October, but two turned up dead in March.

While pods of dolphins raced alongside the navy speedboats and whales sprayed mist out of their blowholes, no vaquitas were seen when Mexico's military recently gave journalists a one-day tour.

The shy 1.5-meter-long (five-foot) cetacean, which has a dark ring around the eye and a mouth turned up a like a smile, avoids human contact.

Threatened with extinction in Mexico

Two species endemic to the Gulf of California are in danger

The vaquita

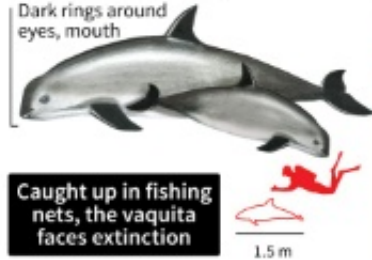
Phocoena sinus

Population: fewer than 100

Weight: 36 kilogrammes

Breed every 1 or 2 years

Dark rings around eyes, mouth



Caught up in fishing nets, the vaquita faces extinction

Sources: Profepa, WWF

Conservation status



Habitat



Critically endangered

Totoaba

Totoaba macdonaldi

Fishing for them is forbidden

Weight: Up to 130 kilograms

Often caught up in shrimp trawlers



Their bladders fetch high prices on black market in Asia

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Two endangered species in Mexico's Gulf of California

"We have sailed a lot and it hasn't been possible (to see one)," said Captain Federico Castro Dominguez, who commands a patrol ship with a powerful radar that relays information to the fast boats that intercept nets or poachers.

"We have seen many species that we thought were vaquitas. We have sent some images, but unfortunately the experts said they were not vaquitas," he told AFP.

As he spoke, navy sailors in a small boat handed a gillnet to environmental authorities, one of more than 500 seized since President Enrique Pena Nieto imposed a two-year ban on such nets in April 2015.

Pena Nieto also increased the vaquita protection area tenfold to 13,000 square kilometers (5,000 square miles), sending the navy patrol ship with a helipad, a dozen high-speed boats and two planes to help

environmental protection authorities.

Authorities have detained around 80 people while seizing more than 100 boats and hundreds of totoaba swim bladders.



Each bladder fetches around \$1,500-\$1,800 in Mexico, rising to \$5,000 in the United States and \$10,000 to \$20,000 apiece in Asia

Sailors on the night watch are finding nets three to 10 times the length of a football field every day, often ensnaring totoabas, dolphins, turtles and sea lions.

But officials see progress because 350 to 500 nets were found annually between 2012-2014, when the vaquita refuge was in a much smaller area.

"There is less illegal fishing," said Joel Gonzalez Moreno, wildlife inspections director at the federal environmental protection prosecutor's office.

He said the government hopes for a four percent increase in the vaquita population. Results from a new count through acoustic and visual studies are expected soon.



A member of the Mexican Navy destroys illegal fishing nets on the Cortes Sea in San Felipe, Mexico

Hidden product

Gonzalez Moreno said China only began to acknowledge the totoaba smuggling problem in January but is now collaborating with US and Mexican authorities to exchange information.

In Hong Kong, an AFP reporter found a shop in the bustling central Sheung Wan area offering totoaba swim bladders, or maw, but the product was hidden.

The storekeeper showed a picture of maw costing tens of thousands of dollars and demanded a deposit.

"We have it in our storage but it will take a few days to bring it here," she said.



Some shops in Hong Kong's bustling Sheung Wan area sell totoaba swim bladders, or maw

Despite the international trade ban, she said maw can still be taken into mainland China from Hong Kong "when you are using it for yourself

and when it's only a small amount."

Others said a crackdown by Chinese authorities was deterring many. Another storekeeper said some shops still had them in stock, just not on display.

"People have been fined. It's putting people off. I am not taking risks, so we don't sell them," he said.

Consumed in soup, maw is believed to cure a host of ailments, from arthritis to discomfort in pregnancy, and plump up skin due to its high collagen content.

Each bladder fetches around \$1,500-\$1,800 in Mexico, rising to \$5,000 in the United States and \$10,000 to \$20,000 apiece in Asia, according to US authorities.



Mexican marines patrol the Cortes Sea in San Felipe during an operation to hunt poachers trying to catch the endangered totoaba fish

Fishermen sell the [swim bladders](#) to smugglers who store them in border towns before sending them to the United States or shipping them directly to Asia in suitcases or through parcel services, Gonzalez Moreno said.

Some buyers have been Chinese or US citizens of Chinese origin, he said.

In 2014, a California man was sentenced to one year in prison after agents found 27 maws in his car at the US-Mexico border and 214 more in a house—all worth an estimated \$3.6 million.

Fishermen compensated

"The source of the problem is in Asia," said Oona Isabelle Layolle, captain of one of two ships sent by the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, an international environmental organization helping the navy by using hooks to fish out nets.

Layolle said poaching was taking place even during daylight before the military intervened. While things have "improved a lot," poachers still come out at night.

Sunshine Antonio Rodriguez Pena, president of the San Felipe fishing cooperative, said the solution is to legalize totoaba fishing with quotas and create a legal market for Asian customers.

Rodriguez negotiated compensation for the region's 1,200 fishermen, who are each receiving between \$750-\$2,130 per month from the

government for giving up nearly all fishing.

He said it was an "insult" to blame fishermen for the vaquita's fate because nature and pollution could also be the culprits.

"However," he said, "it's our commitment as Mexicans and for the government to try to save it."

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